**Rwanda Switches to English: Conflict, Identity and Language-in-Education Policy**

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Rwanda seized the world's attention in April of 1994, when genocidal violence broke out during a bitter guerilla insurgency war. According to official estimates, approximately 937,000 Rwandans died during the 100-day killing spree (Republic of Rwanda, 2008). The Francophone Hutu-led government that instigated the genocide organized a systematic campaign to purge the country of all members of the Tutsi ethnicity as well as any Hutu political opponents (Desforges, 1999). In July 1994, the Anglophone Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by the descendents of longtime Rwandan Tutsi exiles who had fled social unrest in 1959 and onward, took control of the country and established the transitional Government of National Unity.

At the onset of the civil war and genocide, Rwanda belonged to *La Francophonie*, as a former colony of Belgium; by the end of hostilities, Rwanda was under the control of an Anglophone government that in short order declared English to be an additional official language, alongside Kinyarwanda and French. Although it is argued that adopting English as the official language can promote better communication for business, foreign investment, development, and technology transfer, it can also jeopardize other languages, leading to language decline and greater linguistic

homogeneity, while giving an advantage to people who already speak the language and raising formidable barriers for those who do not have access to good language instruction (Tollefson, 2000). In Rwanda, the benefits of learning in English and making a rapid transition from learning in French are not assured for the many students who cannot attend well-resourced schools staffed by well-trained, fluent speakers of English. In order to understand the dramatic change to the policy of official English, we must examine not only the potential of the language shift to increase social and political tensions, but also the way in which the rapid shift to English has been conceived and implemented.

Although some analyses of identity politics (Hintjens, 2008) and language-in-education policy (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010; Walker-Keleher, 2006) highlight the role that language choice and language attitudes play in Rwanda's ongoing efforts to promote reconciliation and peaceful co-existence, issues of language choice have received relatively little attention in the literature on Rwanda's recovery and transition following the genocide. Instead, many scholars have chronicled the genocide, collecting the stories of survivors (e.g. Desforges, 1999; Fujii, 2009; Hatzfeld, 2000; Prunier, 1995, 2009) or analyzing its contributing factors (Hatzfeld, 2005a, 2005b; Mamdani, 2001; Newbury, 2009; Pottier, 2002; Power, 2003; Waldorf, 2009). Western fascination with the genocide and collective guilt over non-intervention are apparent in journalists' reports (Berkeley, 2002; Gourevitch, 1999), and in recent movies such as the highly-sanitized Hollywood production, *Hotel Rwanda* (George et al., 2006), and HBO's *Sometimes in April* (Peck et al., 2005). First-person accounts by survivors and witnesses

have a wide audience, with more published each year (e.g. Chishugi, 2010; Dallaire & Beardsley, 2005; Ilibagiza & Erwin, 2006; Mukasonga, 2010; Mushikiwabo & Kramer, 2006; Rurangwa, 2009; Rusesabagina, 2006; Sebarenzi & Mullane, 2010). These accounts give little indication of the significance of language in Rwanda as an index of identity and political power. In contrast, this chapter argues that language has emerged in Rwanda as a critical factor in what is essentially an identity conflict, with the language of instruction playing a central role. In particular, Rwanda serves as a case study for the influence of English as a global language in a post-conflict context.

In 2007, I participated in seminars for secondary-school history teachers in Rwanda sponsored by the National Curriculum Development Center and facilitated by an American non-profit, Facing History and Ourselves. The teachers received training to use a new Rwandan history curriculum that had been developed collaboratively by Rwanda history experts, teachers, parents and secondary students, with assistance from outside experts through the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley (Freedman et al., 2004; Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy, & Longman, 2011). By analyzing interviews conducted with eleven teachers who participated in these seminars, I have tried to document their attitudes and beliefs about Rwanda's various language-in-education policies. In the interviews, teachers discussed their views of the roles that Kinyarwanda, French and English play in the educational system. In the analysis below, I first review the language-in-education policy situation in Rwanda from a historical perspective, tracing the influence and development of the country's three major languages. I then review the trilingual and bilingual periods in turn and examine the

perspectives of Rwandan secondary teachers who were interviewed in 2007 about their views of the adoption of English. The aim of this chapter is to trace the trajectory of events in Rwanda, exploring the connections between language-in-education policy, civil conflict, and reconciliation. In conjunction with other major challenges facing Rwanda—land reform, post-genocide justice, and reconciliation (Gready, 2010; Straus & Waldorf, 2011)—language policy must be recognized as a critical factor in continuing tensions.

## Rwanda's Languages

Kinyarwanda, French and English have each played a major role in Rwanda's social and political history. The current Constitution of Rwanda, Article 5, states that "The national language is Kinyarwanda. The official languages are Kinyarwanda, French, and English" (Republic of Rwanda, 2003, p. 5). The designation of Kinyarwanda alone as a national language reflects a widespread sentiment that Kinyarwanda is the language that indexes the heart and soul of Rwandan culture (Gafaranga & Niyomugabo, 2010).

Although official statistics are difficult to obtain, an estimated 99% of the population can speak Kinyarwanda, and 90% speak only Kinyarwanda. Estimates of the total number of English speakers range from 1.9% - 5%. Approximately 5% to 15% of the population speaks French (Calvet, 1994; LeClerc, 2008; Munyankesha, 2004), although this percentage has probably dropped due to the large number of Francophone Hutu who have left for exile. Estimates run as high as 11% of the population able to

speak Kiswahili, but these numbers are likely higher now that the country has joined the East African Union. Other languages present in Rwanda include Luganda, Lingala, and Runyankole-Ruchiga (Munyaneza, 2010).

The lack of precise estimates is complicated by the links between language choice and identities, both place-based and ethnic. The make-up of the population is approximately 84% Hutu, 15% Tutsi, and less than 1% Twa (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 2011). The Rwandan Senate has passed legislation prohibiting "genocidal ideology" or "divisionism" (Republic of Rwanda, 2006), thereby suppressing public dialogue about ethnic differences and forcibly constructing a new collective identity: "There are no ethnicities here. We are all Rwandan" (Lacey, 2004). Ethnicity cannot be discussed openly, so language preference has become an index for ethnic identity (Hintjens, 2008; Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Nevertheless, while ethnicity itself has become a forbidden topic, it remains an "unobservable variable in most (empirical) studies of post-genocide Rwanda" (Ingelaere, 2010, p. 275).

Although current estimates show that most Rwandans speak only Kinyarwanda, anyone who has completed primary education has had some training in one or both of the ex-colonial languages. English and French speakers are frequently members of two small rival elites (Hintjens, 2008), with the Anglophone elite firmly in power since the end of the war and genocide in 1994, when it replaced the pre-1994 Hutu elite, which was Francophone. It is the language choice of the elite, then, that has become an index for personal and ethnic identity.

The RPF government has devoted enormous efforts to ensure that there is no repeat to the violence of 1994. The concept of "genocidal ideology" or "divisionism" (Republic of Rwanda, 2006) in Senate legislation is derived from genocide studies and used in the 2003 Constitution; it entered the social discourse on ethnicity in a new and more urgent way in 2006, when "genocide ideology" was defined by the Rwandan Senate as "a set of ideas or representations whose major role is to stir up hatred and create a pernicious atmosphere favouring the implementation and legitimisation of the persecution and elimination of a category of the population" (Rwandan Senate, 2006, p. 16). Chief among the forbidden "ideas or representations" is the use of ethnicity to promote fear, hatred and violence. Much of the interpretation of genocide ideology has thus centered on the eradication of ethnicity in Rwanda, to the point where giving credence to the idea that ethnicity exists in Rwanda is also punished (Morrill, 2006). Despite the continued disagreements among scholars about describing group difference through biological factors, features of language use, or cultural practices (Fought, 2006), the Rwandan Senate adopted a rather limited definition of ethnicity. According to the Rwandan definition, "members of the same ethnic group are those in a community who speak the same language, share the same culture, live on the same territory and consider themselves as belonging to the same group" (Rwandan Senate, 2006, p. 17). Although this definition reflects an understanding of ethnicity as a multidimensional and changeable construct influenced by perceived difference in language, dialect, race, locality, or cultural practices (Eltringham, 2004), the Rwandan authorities have decided to suppress any discussion of these differences and to forcibly (co-)construct a new

collective identity (Lacey, 2004), instead of examining the co-construction of the Hutu, Tutsi or Twa groups and the ways that these constructs can have real saliency for the people who see themselves as belonging to one group and not another. This atmosphere makes inquiry into the possible relationships between dialect use, regional provenance, and group affiliations potentially sensitive. Nevertheless, external scholars continue to assert that ethnicity plays a role in the daily lives of most Rwandans, perhaps a greater role now than before the genocide (Buckley-Zistel, 2006; Longman & Rutagengwa, 2004; Zorbas, 2004).

Beyond issues of ethnicity, Rwanda is a country where political dissent is assiduously squelched. Human Rights Watch (2010) has issued numerous reports on the oppressive nature of what has become a de-facto one-party authoritarian state, with civil society squeezed by lack of internal freedoms (Gready, 2010). Because the international community was quick to embrace Rwanda's development and eager to view the country as making a rapid transition to democracy, growing awareness of oppression of dissent, exclusion, and dictatorship has been muted, although the re-election of President Paul Kagame in August 2010, in which he received 93% of the vote, was marred by suspensions of newspapers, arrests of journalists and political opponents, grenade attacks in Kigali, the expulsion of human rights observers, and the murder of an opposition party official (Butare, 2010; Gettleman & Kron, 2010; Kron & Gettleman, 2010a, 2010b). The international NGO community has been slow to recognize that deep popular frustration is likely to result in the emergence of structural and acute violence (Reyntjens, 2006, 2011). A recent volume edited by Straus and Waldorf (2011) chronicling Rwanda's slide from

democratization attracted strident and public personal attacks on the several contributors. Such dissent is almost impossible to find internally, as many of Kagame's opponents have been jailed or have fled into external exile.

I move now to an overview of Rwanda's three official languages. Tracing first Kinyarwanda from pre-colonial times, then Belgian French since the colonial era, and finally English in the post-genocide period, I examine the role of each language in the educational policy of Rwanda.

**Kinyarwanda**

*Kinyarwanda in pre-colonial Rwanda.* Although there is considerable disagreement among Rwandans over pre-colonial social and ethnic relations, most agree that as far back as oral history can provide evidence, all Rwandans, whether Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa, have spoken Kinyarwanda. Rwanda's population of 9.9 million shares Kinyarwanda as the sole indigenous language, while, by comparison, Cameroon (population 17 million) is home to 279 living languages. South Africa (population 43 million) has 24 languages (Gordon & Grimes, 2005), and its constitution recognizes 11 of them as official (Heugh, 2007). Rwanda's relative lack of sociolinguistic complexity is uncommon among African nations and has been used to justify the historical unity of Rwanda's people.

Kinyarwanda (also known as Ikinyarwanda, Rwanda) is a prototypical Bantu language, with several mutually intelligible variants spoken in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo-Kinshasa), Uganda and Tanzania (Kimenyi, 1986).

Interdisciplinary archeological and reconstructive linguistic research examining iron smelting technology (Schmidt, 1997), agricultural practices, and food vocabularies (Schoenbrun, 1993a, 1993b) in the region suggest that Sudanic and Cushitic languages may have been assimilated into Great Lakes Bantu languages in the region around 2500 years ago (Obura, 2003). The Twa minority, who are related to other forest dwellers across Central Africa, speak a dialect called Rutwa, and several other dialects have been labeled as "Hutu" dialects (Lera, Ululera, Hera, Ndara, Shobyo, Tshogo, Ndogo) (Gordon & Grimes, 2005). Rwandan linguists differ on the number of regional dialects—from six to seven—and their prevalence, but they agree that the majority of Rwandans use standard Kinyarwanda, and that the dialects are used in informal contexts only (Munyankesha, 2004). Because the current ideology of language and ethnicity in Rwanda forbids discourse that might highlight differences between groups, any discussion of historical linguistic evidence for the merging of distinct languages into modern-day Kinyarwanda is politically sensitive. The effect of this ideology has been particularly brutal for the Twa minority, who experience significant discrimination in access to education and livelihood opportunities, but whose needs cannot be addressed without acknowledging their cultural, social and ethnic differences (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Working Group of Experts on Indigenous Populations/Communities, 2010).

*Kinyarwanda in colonial and postcolonial Rwanda.* During the colonial period, the Belgians ran French-medium schools to educate a small, mainly Tutsi, bureaucratic elite.

French was retained as the language of prestige and political power immediately after independence, and Kinyarwanda remained less developed because it was not the language of instruction beyond primary school (McLean Hilker, 2011). In the postcolonial period (1962 to the present), Kinyarwanda has the status of a de facto regional language, although nomenclature masks this reality. Varieties are spoken by groups in the bordering countries of Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. For example, Kirundi, the national language of Burundi, Rwanda's 'twin' kingdom-nation to the south, is mutually intelligible with Kinyarwanda. Of the estimated 25-35 million speakers of Kinyarwanda today, almost 10 million reside within the borders of Rwanda (Kagame, Chaka, & Busingye, 2007). The name 'Ururimi,' which means 'language' or 'tongue' in Kinyarwanda (Niyomugabo, 2009), has been adopted to describe the language community of speakers of Kinyarwanda both inside and outside of Rwanda (*New Times*, 2008). A recent ethnography of the Rwandan Senate demonstrated that while English and French were the languages that often appeared in the public face of the Senate in correspondence, draft legislation, signs and announcements, Kinyarwanda was at the center of daily activities, including debates on the Senate floor (Gafaranga & Niyomugabo, 2010). These developments reflect an *in vivo* (Calvet, 1994) evolution of language use that is characterized by spontaneous growth of language use (hence not planned by decision-making bureaucrats) through mutually intelligible languages and lingua francas across national borders and regions.

Although Kinyarwanda is the national language and the linguistic currency of daily life throughout the country, it has experienced the benign neglect that has been the

fate of many other African languages. Rwandans who do not speak Kinyarwanda are usually "old caseload" refugees who have grown up abroad. They are frequently ridiculed by their compatriots for their lack of Kinyarwanda skills, as Kinyarwanda is viewed as a great unifier. Most believe that no true Rwandan should be unable to speak it. In an interview in 2007, Charles, a Rwandan teacher born and raised in Uganda who moved to Rwanda after the genocide, shared with me that he didn't consider himself fluent in Kinyarwanda: "Let me tell you, we are getting very many people who are not fluent in Kinyarwanda. Even myself, I cannot express myself well in Kinyarwanda. There are many. There are many! Because you find that in many areas that need technology, the people [working in these sectors] are foreigners, or they are people brought up in other countries." Charles also explained that many Rwandans of his acquaintance did not speak the language well. The actual number of Rwandans who do not speak Kinyarwanda fluently is difficult to ascertain.

**Belgian French**

*French in colonial and postcolonial Rwanda.* French arrived in Rwanda when the League of Nations awarded Belgium control of the Ruanda-Urundi mandate territory after the defeat of imperial Germany in 1919. Following the divide-and-rule policy common among European colonizers, the Belgians allied themselves with the Tutsi nobility, at the expense of the Hutu majority population, while applying Western racial ideology to preexisting Rwandan social and economic divisions. Through this lens, they

considered the Tutsi to be racially superior to the Hutu and established French-medium schools to educate the sons of Tutsi nobles as Rwandan colonial officials. Hutu youth could gain study places, but they were not given priority. This schooling was not compulsory, nor was it free.

At the time of independence from Belgian rule in 1962, Hutu factions seized control of the government. French continued as the language of secondary and tertiary schooling, as well as the language of business and officialdom. But after independence, in contrast to the colonial period, Hutu students received priority in gaining access to schools, while places for Tutsi students were severely limited.

*French in post-1994 Rwanda.* During the post-war period (1994-present), French has suffered from negative attitudes due to the alleged involvement of the French army in *Opération Turquoise*, the only international intervention during the genocide, conducted unilaterally by the French, but widely perceived by Rwandans as aiding the Hutu genocidaires rather than providing sanctuary for Tutsi survivors (National Public Radio, 2008; Pottier, 2002; Prunier, 1995). Many of the English-speaking returnees have little interest in learning French, which they view as the language of the French allies and supporters of the Francophone genocidaires. Diplomatic relations with France were cut off for several years in response to the French indictment of President Paul Kagame by a French judge for his alleged involvement in shooting down then-President Juvenal Habyarimana's plane in 1994 (Doyle, 2006) and to the 2008 arrest in Germany and

extradition to France for war crimes of a senior official from Kagame's administration (McGreal, 2008).

According to Canadian sociolinguist Leclerc (2008), Rwanda is situated on "la ligne Maginot linguistique" (the linguistic Maginot line) between formerly British territories to the east (Ugandan, Kenya, Tanzania) and the former colonies of France and Belgium to the west (Burundi, Congo-Kinshasa, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Ivory Coast). Leclerc writes that English is a sort of wolf in sheep's clothing that destroys the status of French wherever it is introduced into Francophone territories:

> On sait que, une fois que l'anglais est admis comme langue officielle au sein d'une organisation nationale ou internationale, les Américains, souvent aidés des Britanniques, font tous les efforts nécessaires pour éliminer les autres langues qui ne deviennent plus alors que de simples véhicules de traduction. Pensons à ce qui se passe présentement au Burundi et au Congo-Kinshasa, tandis qu'on essaie subtilement de faire entrer le «loup dans la bergerie» (l'anglais).
>
> [As we know, once English is accepted as an official language in a national or international organization, the Americans, often with assistance from the British, make every effort to eliminate other languages, which become little more than vehicles of translation. Consider what is currently happening in Burundi and Congo-Kinshasa, where efforts are underway to allow "the wolf in the sheep's clothing" (English).]

These trenchant metaphors for the influence of English in francophone Africa—the wolf in sheep's clothing, the linguistic Maginot line—express some of the Francophone apprehension about the encroachment of English into *La Francophonie* and the diminishing sphere of influence of French in sub-Saharan Africa (Omoniyi, 2007).

In an interview, Joseph, a Francophone Rwandan who was a secondary student living in Rwanda at the time of the genocide, stated that he thought that French was dying in Rwanda. He did most of the interview in English and when asked if he ever felt pressure to use English, he stated, in English: "Yes, now when we are looking for a job, you see, our country is becoming little by little Anglophone, so we are obliged to use English when we go to look for a job, to apply for a job. When you know English, it's OK. French is, nowadays, French is expiring, you see." Joseph's comments, coming from a speaker of French who was making the transition to English and insisted on speaking in English throughout most of his interview, suggest that French would have continued to lose ground to English without a rapid change in language of instruction. As late as 2011, French was still present in official documents on government websites, testimony to the relative ease of announcing language shift in comparision with actually enforcing or implementing it. I turn now to English and its status in Rwanda since the end of the genocide.

**English**

*English in post-1994 Rwanda.* English became the de-facto language of influence beginning in July 1994 when the victorious Rwandan Patriotric Front took control of Kigali. This victory set the stage for a large influx of diasporic old-caseload Rwandan refugees returning to their homeland from nearby Anglophone countries (Uganda primarily, but also Kenya and Tanzania). The number of these returnees grew to the point where they equaled or exceeded the number of Rwandans who lost their lives in the genocide (Prunier, 2009). With political and economic power concentrated in the hands of an elite group of Anglophone returnees from Uganda, the decision to establish English an official language was made in 1996.

Many Rwandans welcomed English as a means for improving international connections, opening up access to education abroad, and developing Rwanda's economy (Freedman, et al., 2004). Fieldwork in 2001 found that Rwandans accepted English for the same reasons that parents, teachers and students in other countries worldwide are adopting English (Freedman, et al., 2004): Rwandans perceived that the future of globalization is written in English, and they wanted to able to participate in that new world. The process of Anglicization of Rwanda has proceeded to the point where Rwanda joined the East African Union and gained membership in the Commonwealth in 2009.



**Trilingual Language-in-Education Policy (1996-2008)**

Rwanda's trilingual language policy lasted 14 years, from 1996, when English was formally declared an additional official language, to 2008, when Kagame announced plans to discontinue the use of French. In this section, I review the policy and explore some of the perspectives of teachers interviewed during this period.

During this period, Rwandan schools implemented a complex trilingual system that required all children to learn all three languages. Kinyarwanda was the language of instruction for the youngest students. French and English were compulsory subjects (Obura, 2003), but the students were required to make a switch to French- or English-medium instruction beginning in the upper primary levels (4-6). Children who completed primary school and passed the national examinations were expected to transition to an English- or French-medium secondary school. National examinations were offered in both French and English. All students took classes in Kinyarwanda language and literature throughout their schooling.

At the university level, students were expected to be able to complete academic work in both languages. The nation's major higher education institutions—National University of Rwanda (NUR), Kigali Institute of Education (KIE), and Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST)—were officially English-French bilingual institutions where faculty members could lecture in either language, with students expected to follow along in both. Students who lacked proficiency in one language were required to complete a bridge year of language studies before beginning their studies (Obura, 2003).

This policy placed an enormous burden on an educational system already under strain from efforts to rebuild and rehabilitate following the war. The percentage of

qualified primary school teachers had fallen from 57% in 1992 to 32.5% in 1997 and the percentage of qualified secondary school teachers dropped from 63% to 33% in the same period (Republic of Rwanda, 1998). Approximately 75% of public sector employees, including teachers, were either victims of the violence or participated in the genocide (Republic of Rwanda, 1998). Given the severe challenges arising from imposing the language-policy changes on a ravaged educational system that lacked skilled teachers and sufficient resources, the ultimate success of the trilingual policy was never assured (LeClerc, 2008; Munyankesha, 2004). Indeed, most schools did not have the resources to provide content courses in both French and English, so most elected to be primarily English-medium or French-medium. The majority continued operating as French-medium schools. Some schools were bilingual, but some had separate Anglophone and Francophone streams, allowing students to take content classes in the language they knew best while continuing to learn the other as a subject (Obura, 2003).

During this period, warnings about the potential for the trilingual policy to exacerbate divisions among Rwandans came largely from international observers. Language choice was already a "quasi-ethnic identifier" (Walker-Keleher, 2006, p. 46) of the likely ethnicity of a person (Anglophone Tutsi, Francophone Hutu, and Francophone Tutsi genocide victims). Given the prohibition against speaking about ethnicity, language choice became an even more salient stand-in for ethnic differences (Hintjens, 2008; Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Choice of school along language-preference lines made school segregation a real possibility, as students in English-medium schools would be more likely to interact with other Anglophone Tutsi students and have fewer

opportunities to engage in real collaborative learning situations with Francophone Hutu students or Francophone Tutsi genocide survivors.

**Teacher Perspectives on Language during the Trilingual Period**

In July 2007, near the end of the trilingual period, I interviewed secondary teachers who participated in the history curriculum seminars. The teachers exhibited positive attitudes towards English, and even believed that English was an easier language than French. All welcomed it as a way of making educational achievement more accessible, but they had different views on the ways that Rwanda's language situation could contribute towards reconciliation. Few seemed to anticipate the abrupt policy shift that would be announced approximately 18 months later.

Charles, who had explained to me earlier that his Kinyarwanda skills were not strong, said that he found the English language both simple and rich: "It is easier for students to express themselves [in English]." Eugene, also an Anglophone teacher from Uganda, believed that "English reveals the information properly to the one you are instructing." Francophone teachers also shared similar views about the ease of learning in English versus learning in French. Joseph, a Francophone teacher, contextualized the switch to English from the perspective of an English learner:

> Because we have lived a long time in the French system, the students are afraid and they say that it will be difficult to know English, but little by little they are

> appreciating English when they consider the effort they put into knowing English is less than the effort they put into knowing French. You see that French is more complicated than English. They appreciate learning English.

I asked teachers to discuss their views of how the trilingual policy could promote reconciliation. Some, fearing that language differences could lead to conflict that would hinder the process of reconciliation, believed that all Rwandans should learn both English and French. Eddie, an Anglophone teacher from Ugandan, recognized that English had the relatively foreign status of a language that was introduced by a conquering army. He suggested that Anglophones should learn to speak French:

> Because not all know English. Because if you try to talk to them in English, they say, 'They are now bringing their foreign language.' So it is better if you talk to someone and say 'How are you?' It is better to also say 'Bonjour.' You can at least know the two languages. But I feel that if you only know one language, you may be talking to people who are not knowing it. And that may cause some kind of difference […] which may not bring reconciliation.

Likewise, Béatrice, a Francophone teacher who had survived the genocide, believed that learning several languages would enable Rwandans to communicate freely and comfortably with each other:

Vous voyez que [être bilingue] peut permettre à la réconciliation, dans le cas de se sentir à l'aise. Quand on est capable de s'exprimer en français, quand on est capable de s'exprimer en anglais, on ne se limite pas. Si on ne se limite pas, si tu va parler avec un groupe qui parle anglais, si tu va parler avec en groupe qui parle français, tu te sens a l'aise. Je crois que ça se peut aider. Vous voyez qu'il y a … ça peut aider à la réconciliation aussi. Si tu te sens à l'aise dans touts les partis. Je crois que ça peut permettre. Puisque la réconciliation c'est quoi .. c'est la mise ensemble des deux côtés. Si on ne se limite, pas quand on va arriver ici et là, je crois que ça peut permettre aussi, comme le départ de l'unité et la réconciliation.

[You see that [being bilingual] can allow for reconciliation, in the case of feeling at ease. When you are able to express yourself in French, when you are able to express yourself in English, it isn't. If it isn't, you will speak with a group who speaks English, if you will speak with group who speaks French, you feel comfortable. I think that it can help. You see that there are... It can help reconciliation also. If you feel comfortable wherever you are. I think that it can allow [for reconciliation]. Since the reconciliation is the bringing together of both sides. If it is limited, not when it will happen here and there, I think that it can also, as the starting point for unity and reconciliation.]

Other teachers believe that the languages differences should be dealt with by designating a single language that everyone should learn. This step would not only promote unity; it would also help to reduce the inefficiencies brought about by the lack of a shared language. Eugene echoed the sentiments of many Rwandans when he stated that Rwanda had a language problem. He referred to the situation in the history seminary, where everything had to be translated into at least one other language. When the facilitator spoke in English, an interpreter had to be present to translate into French. Likewise a French facilitator needed an English interpreter. Even when Kinyarwanda was the language of the facilitator, the discourse still needed to be translated, this time into English, since the Anglophone participants were the ones who were less likely to speak fluent Kinyarwanda. Eugene expressed himself as follows:

> Here we still have the problem of language, now in Rwanda. We don't have any other uniting language. […] even we use more time because of language. If we had a uniting language, do you think that we would be using the time that we are using here? [referring to the discussion in the history seminar] […] Compared with Uganda, at least English unites people there, all over the country, as far as administration is concerned. Now here, I don't know for how long it is bilingual. I don't know how long we shall go on like this, and implementing things normally, too. Because language shows as if we are not one, as if we are not Rwandese. The means of instruction is very important and vital in development. A person may tell you something which is instrumental, but because you have not

> understood it, you remain undeveloped. That is why we would suggest … there must be enforcement or other new strategies in leading to the teaching of English in the country right from the grassroots. […] Now if I say that English will help in the reconciliation process, basing on that grounds, I'm a hundred percent correct. English will help.

Claver, a Francophone Rwandan whose family fled to Burundi during the First Republic (1973-1990) to escape persecution directed at Tutsis, declared that he thought the addition of English was very positive in the schools:

> C'est une très bonne chose. C'est une très bonne chose. Parce que c'est partout aujourd'hui; on sait que c'est très imporant. Tout practiquement, il faut parler anglais. C'est intéressant … Sauf que, c'est dommage que ça va encore cristalliser les divisions. Parce qu'il y'en a qui croient que l'introduction de l'anglais, c'est parce qu'il y a le président qui est anglophone; il est d'Ouganda. Ouais, il ya des divisions ici; il y a toujours des problèmes. Les Rwandais sont difficiles. Si ce n'est pas les ethnies, ce sont les origines. Moi, Claver, je suis de Burundi. Des autres sont de je ne sais pas. L'autre qui est anglophone. Mais dans les écoles c'est une bonne chose. Je ne crois qu'il y a personne qui refuse l'anglais; on peut refuser le français, oui, mais l'anglais non. […] L'anglais intéresse beaucoup les élèves, parce qu'on sait que aujourd'hui on ne peut faire rien sans cette langue. Ouai, ouai.

> [It is a very good thing. It is a very good thing. Because it is everywhere today; we know that it is very important. Practically speaking, it is necessary to speak English. It is interesting … except that, it is unfortunate that this will still crystallize divisions. Because there are some who believe that the introduction of English is because there is the president who is English, who comes from Uganda. Yeah, there are divisions here; there are always problems. The Rwandans are difficult. If it's not ethnic groups, then it's origins. Me, Claver, I am of Burundi. Others are from I know not where. Another is Anglophone … But in the schools, it is a good thing. I do believe that no one refuses English; it's possible to refuse French, yes, but English, no. [ …] English interests the students a lot, because we know that today we can do nothing without this language. Yeah. Yeah.]

These teachers spoke to me in 2007, near the end of the trilingual period. All had positive attitudes towards English and accepted its addition. With the exception of Eugene, none seemed to anticipate the upcoming switch to a bilingual policy.



## Bilingual Language-in-Education Policy, 2008 to Present

The second period in contemporary Rwandan language-in-education policy began at the end of 2008, when French was dropped as an official language. The ramifications of this

policy change were intended to reach all areas of Rwandan society where French was formerly used, including law, conferences, road signs, and textbooks. According to Munyaneza (2010), the main purpose of the switch was "harmonization of the curriculum"(p. 13). Although this step may have been planned for some time at the administrative level, the manner in which the shift was carried out may have only served to increase tensions between ethnic groups in Rwanda.

The transition took place very quickly, within a two-year period (2008 to 2010). In 2008, secondary school and university students were told that they must pass their examinations in English by July 2009. Even at the primary level, P.6 (sixth grade) students who until 2008 had been studying primarily in Kinyarwanda and French had to take their national examinations in English in 2009. Francophone teachers were required to study English in their free time and were expected to pass English competency exams if they wished to keep on teaching. For the generation of teachers who were trained in French, and for the current cohorts of students who had been studying in French while learning English as a subject, the prospects of making a smooth and rapid transition to English-medium education without detriment to livelihood and educational prospects were doubtful and highly stressful.

Teachers were provided with classes to help them improve their English; however, many complaints arose about the quality of these classes. The Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) announced that it planned to punish teachers who did not comply with orders to attend the classes (MINEDUC, 2010b, 2011; *New Times*, 2010). In the rural areas, where many schools still lack basic amenities such as running water

and must hold double shifts every day to accommodate the student population, the transition to English placed an even greater burden on overloaded teachers, many of whom were graduates of Francophone teacher training institutes. The new policy threatened these teachers with the loss of their jobs if they were not able to improve their English proficiency quickly. Furthermore, competition from Anglophone teachers in other East Africa Union countries, who were now able to find work in Rwanda, added to the instability of these teachers' jobs.

The emphasis on English-medium instruction for primary students ignored the potential for mother tongue education that would allow children to develop Kinyarwanda literacy while also learning English (or French) as a subject in the early grades (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). In 2010, the Ministry of Education pulled back on its 2008 decision to push English to early primary grades. It made this reversal partially in response to growing concern over the number of young people who are uncomfortable speaking Kinyarwanda. This reversal also followed recognition by African scholars that African children can learn better when the language of instruction is their first language and that children who must complete all of their education in a language that is not their mother tongue are susceptible to language loss (Afrique en Ligne, 2010). Press releases from the Ministry of Education underscored this concern (Kwizera, 2011; MINEDUC, 2010a).



## Critical Perspectives on English in Rwanda

Rwanda is not the only country to undergo a shift to English as the language of instruction in recent years. Privileging English over local languages and promoting English-based content instruction is a growing trend world-wide, and English is widely perceived as a prerequisite for participation in a global economy (Brutt-Griffler, 2002), despite uncertainty about the effects of policies that privilege English over local languages and that promote English-based content instruction at ever lower grades (Brock-Utne & Hopson, 2005; Brocke-Utne, 2002; Hornberger, 2008). In Africa, Namibia (Harlech-Jones, 1990), Botswana (Magogwe, 2007), Mali (Canvin, 2007), Djibouti (Dudzik, 2007), and South Africa (Heugh, 2007; Uys, Van der Wait, & Botha, 2007; Webb, 2004) are implementing dramatic changes in their language policies. Elsewhere, China (G. Hu, 2008; Y. Hu, 2007), Pakistan (Rassool & Mansoor, 2007) and South Korea (Jo, 2008) are increasing the status of English as a medium of instruction at ever-lower grade levels. The most recent example is the newly formed country of Southern Sudan, which has adopted English as an official language since partition from Arabic-dominant Sudan in 2011.

While Rwanda has made progress in educational reform, its language policy, especially its policy for language of instruction, appears to be provisional tinkering; its most recent decision to preserve Kinyarwanda in the early elementary levels, coming quickly on the heels of a push for English, gives the impression that the policy is being created on a contingent basis in response to challenges and pressures, without a clear guiding vision. Such rapid policy changes suggest that policy has been dictated by sociopolitical priorities rather than by careful analysis of the educational interests of

children, particularly those living in rural areas and attending mainly Francophone schools. The continued emphasis on English will undoubtedly continue to favor relatively well-off Anglophone students attending urban schools.

ELT professionals, while perhaps sympathetic to common rationales for teaching English in international contexts, need to be aware of the tensions and challenges that arise from language-in-education policy decisions that favor the teaching of English. It is particularly important to maintain a critical perspective on the ecological context of English-promotion policies in Rwanda, and possible unintended consequences in the form of communicative inequality, economic exploitation, and resistance. Indeed, Canagarajah (2005) has suggested that social and political tensions such as those faced by Rwanda are often an expected outcome of language-in-education policy and planning changes, rather than evidence that the policy is flawed, while McLean Hilker (2011) warns that future language policy should ensure that tensions between groups are not exacerbated by one group gaining educational advantage.

Ultimately language policies should reflect the importance of teaching children first in a language that they can understand well. Recent research highlights the critical importance that language-in-education policies play in the success of educational systems worldwide (Pinnock, 2009). Children who must learn in a language they do not understand well are always at risk of educational failure, but in multilingual nations that are characterized by high levels of fragility or conflict, with large rural populations where many children do not have access to mother-tongue language, the risks are amplified. Children need at least five years of second language study to reach academic language

proficiency (see Cummins & Yee-Fun, 2007), so most pupils who begin learning a second language in primary school are not going to be ready for academic work in that language by the time they reach upper primary grades. Indeed, Pinnock (2009) argues that failure to place sufficient emphasis on mother tongue education is endangering the international goals of the UNESCO and UNICEF program Education for All, a worldwide initiative to provide high quality basic education to all people by 2015. As a policy recommendation, Pinnock urges that the first six years of schooling be provided in the child's mother tongue, along with the gradual, structured introduction of second languages.

Pinnock (2009) defines "linguistic fractionalization" (p. 9) as the complexity and extensiveness of linguistic, religious or cultural divisions between groups in a single nation. In Pinnock's analysis, Rwanda is not considered linguistically fractionalized, and with only one major indigenous language, it is far less multilingual than most African nations. Yet Rwanda's recent history of violent conflict, the large proportion of its population living in poverty, and its current political repression place its language policies under enormous strain, and infuse them with social and political significance. Despite these challenges, a prominent goal of the Rwandan Ministry of Education is to increase access to schooling for the general population through Education for All (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2007). Given the current circumstances, Rwanda is well-situated to develop Kinyarwanda as a language of instruction through the primary grades and beyond, ultimately providing high quality basic education to all of its citizens.

One implication of language policy issues in Rwanda is the need for the English-teaching profession to insist on a critical perspective toward the role that English plays in education worldwide and the consequences for children who are forced to learn in a language that is not familiar to them. Engaged critical professionals can advocate for linguistic rights (Phillipson, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), ask tough questions about appropriate pedagogy for teaching English in multilingual and global contexts (McKay, 2003), and support mother tongue education and additive multilingualism when the circumstances warrant (Annamalai, 2003; Hornberger, 2003).

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